



THE METHODIST PEACE FELLOWSHIP
with the
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PEACE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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WAR AND PEACE - THE CHANGING AGENDA

(Looking backwards and forwards)

**Rev. Dr. Kenneth Greet,
Past President of the Methodist Church, Past Secretary of Conference,
President of the Methodist Peace Fellowship
and a Vice President of the World Disarmament Campaign**

One of the formative events of my boyhood happened like this. My beloved father said,

“I would like to take you to hear one of Methodism's great men. His name is the Rev Henry Carter and he has the biggest mouth in Methodism; when he opens it you will think it will never shut again, and when he shuts it you will think it will never open again.”

When we arrived at the meeting I was, of course, eager to see this remarkable mouth. Well, Mr Carter certainly had a very firm jaw, but it was what came out of his mouth that held me spellbound. The blend of passion and logic was utterly compelling.

A PROPHETIC CHARGE

Years later, when I was minister at the Tonypany Central Hall, I invited Mr Carter to come and preach. It was a memorable day. On the Monday morning, as his train pulled out of the station he leaned out of the carriage window and said, “Kenneth, I could die happy if I could believe that our Methodist people were becoming socially minded.” It was a prophetic charge from an old minister to a young colleague. Mr Carter died not long afterwards.

When I left the Rhondda Valley it was to become Secretary of the Department which, under an earlier name, he had founded. The Christian Citizenship Department was charged with the responsibility of helping the Methodist people to understand the great social, political and international issues of the day, and work out a Christian response to them. In my office I discovered some of Mr Carter's files. In one of them were two letters in which he tendered his resignation. They were never sent; he survived the storms of protest that often accompanied his statements, especially those on peace and war.

The unconditional pacifism which he preached has always been a minority view in Methodism, though the membership of the Methodist Peace Fellowship (MPF) which he founded had 5000 members in 1940, one thousand of whom were ministers - enough to ensure that questions of war and peace were not neglected in the life of the church.

IMPORTANT CHANGES

As the current President of the MPF I have found myself reflecting on the changes which have taken place as we have sought to respond to the ever-changing world situation. I would like to refer to six of these changes which are important both for pacifists and non-pacifists alike.

1. The pacifists of today are, I think, more aware than those of earlier generations of the need to relate their beliefs to the hard actualities of the world. The personal stand against violence of every kind is immensely important; for me it is one of the basic demands Jesus makes of all his followers. In the past that has often been contrasted with the 'realism' that accepts the need to find effective ways of dealing with conflicts in a world dominated by military forces. I do not think that contrast has been fair; after all, there are many instances where the use of military might has produced widespread chaos and misery, and created fresh problems. The invasion of Iraq is a recent case in point. I am glad, however, that the MPF and other pacifist organisations are trying to answer the question 'What must be DONE?' This MPF series of pamphlets under the title "Peace in the 21st Century" is part of that effort.

2. Pacifists are more willing than ever to work with those who share their concern but not their basic belief. The MPF has created an associate membership for those who fall into that category. And I myself have for many years served the World Disarmament Campaign, first as President and now as Vice-President. This small but determined organisation was founded by two noble lords, Fenner Brockway and Phillip Noel-Baker when both of them were in their nineties! I have enjoyed working in an organisation which embraces people of different faiths and of none, but all of whom desire to campaign for a disarmed world.

I mention in passing that many of the peace organisations are maintained largely by older men and women who can remember the horrors of war. There is a great need to fire the enthusiasm of younger folk who do not have such memories but for whom a future free of the horrors of war is hugely important. Through the R. J. Barker Fund, which is administered by the MPF, we have been able to support and encourage a number of young people engaged on peace projects.

3. It is interesting to note that in the discussions of fifty years ago there was very little reference to the theory of 'Just War.' Now that issue has a place on the agendas of all the peace organisations and of the church generally. It is easy to see why. The destructive power of modern weaponry is so enormous that it is difficult to see how any modern war could conform to the limiting criteria of 'just war' as traditionally defined. That tradition has been changed and refined over the centuries. From the beginning it has been an attempt to limit the destructiveness of war. One crucial clause states that there must be no deliberate attack of civilians and non-military targets. Another requirement is that the means used must be proportionate. In past conflicts opposing sides have driven a coach and horses through these limitations. In today's wars most of the casualties are civilians. The challenge which this presents to the church, which has always quoted the just war definition in support of Christian participation, in armed conflict must now be squarely faced.

4. There is a growing demand for the banning of all nuclear weapons. Landmines, chemical weapons and biological weapons have been outlawed. Four countries have already given up their nuclear weapons; nine still retain and develop them. The world total of these atrocities is 26,000. The USA spends \$40 billion a year on them. Unless these horrendous weapons are banned they may well be used again, either intentionally or accidentally.

There is a widespread view that international agreements "are not worth the paper they are written on." This is an unwarranted pessimism and does not accord with the facts. Many of the agreements made by governments in the field of arms control have been kept. Progress on disarmament depends on a number of factors. These include tighter control on the manufacture, distribution and use of weapons (the Campaign Against the Arms Trade is doing a fine job in this area), attempts to increase international trust and confidence (President Obama's changes in American foreign policy give ground for hope), and the creation of the institutions of peaceful cooperation (see what this has done for a former war-ridden Continent of Europe).

5. There is now a greater awareness of the inter-relatedness of all the great social, economic and political issues of the day. Peace is not a free-standing matter; it depends on all sorts of things being put right. There can be no peace unless we create the CONDITIONS of peace. It is this increased awareness that inspires the work of Christian Aid and other relief agencies, and the drive to "Make Poverty History." Whilst the relief work done in response to emergencies like flood and famine is hugely important, it is recognised that long-term planning and sound policies are essential if future disasters are to be avoided. A world unjustly divided between rich and poor cannot be a world at peace.

6. The peace discussions, which in the middle of the last century concentrated on East/West issues, are now more concerned with the problems arising from the North/South divide. Hence the enthusiastic response to the attempts to rid poor countries of the burden of debt which hinders their progress. Television at its best has become a window onto the world as it really is. The fact that most of its inhabitants are under-privileged and many go hungry, can no longer be hidden.

I began by recalling a great speech which influenced me as a young lad. I end by quoting the closing paragraphs of another mighty utterance to which I listened when much later in life I was Methodist observer at the Lambeth Conference. It was delivered by the late Barbara Ward, one of the most inspiring speakers to whom I have ever listened. She said:

'As the airs and oceans flow round our little planet, there is not much difference between your strontium-90 and my strontium-90. They are lethal to us both.'

"It is even possible that recognition of our environmental interdependence can do more than save us, negatively, from the final folly of war. It could, positively, give us that sense of community, of belonging and living together, without which no human community can be built up, survive and prosper. Our links of blood and history, our sense of shared culture and achievement, our traditions, our faiths are all precious and enrich the world with the variety of scale and function required for every vital ecosystem. But we have lacked a wider rationale of unity. Our prophets have sought it. Our poets have dreamed of it. But it is only in our own day that astronomers, physicists, geologists, chemists, biologists, anthropologists, ethnologists and archaeologists have all combined in a single witness of advanced science to tell us that, in every alphabet of our being, we do indeed belong to a single system, powered by a single energy, manifesting a fundamental unity under all its variations, depending for its survival on the balance and health of the total system."

"If this vision of unity - which is not a vision only, but a hard and inescapable scientific fact - can become part of the common insight of all the inhabitants of Planet Earth, then we may find that, beyond all our inevitable pluralisms, we can achieve just enough unity of purpose to build a human world."

As I listened to these words I heard again St Paul's assertion that the aim of God is to bring the whole universe, everything on heaven and earth into a unity in Christ. Today science and religion bid us share that vision of unity.

When Jesus blessed the peacemakers he gave them plenty to do.

Kenneth Greet.

PRAYER

Prince of Peace, in whose perfect Kingdom no sword is drawn but the sword of righteousness, and no strength known but the strength of love; bless, we pray, the work of the peacemakers, and give us some small share in their travail. Save us from discouragement and weariness. For your name's sake. **Amen.**

NOTE Part of this article appeared in the Methodist Recorder and is reproduced here by kind permission of the Editor

FROM Dr. Alan Litherland to Methodist readers of "Peace in the 21st Century" who are not already members of the Methodist Peace Fellowship.

I would like to invite you to consider becoming members of MPF if you are in sympathy with its work and message. The first step would be to write to the Secretary, Rev. Maurice Wright (see below) asking for more information about the MPF. It does a valuable job with limited resources. Lots of new members would be a great encouragement, so I hope there will be a good response!

Alan.

Note from the Secretary, Rev. Maurice Wright, (01743 873 633) mhw@surf.free.co.uk, 3, Cornwall Dr. Shrewsbury, SY3 0EP). Thanks to Alan who asked if he could send the above message to the readers. Best wishes to him; he has just had a birthday. I can't possibly say how old he is but he is the same age as FOR! The membership leaflet and back copies of P21C can be found on our website for those able to access it. It is www.mpf.org.uk. I apologise to those who received postal copies of P21C as well as the usual email ones. It was due to a misunderstanding added to a mix up with the person who produced the labels!

The Methodist Conference this year is in Wolverhampton. The details are below. We will be concentrating on young people and those who have benefited from the R. J. Barker Fund.

Methodist Peace Fellowship Conference Meeting
"Young Peacemakers & Healing Communities"
Experiences in Rwanda, Nigeria and at Aldermaston.
Chair: Mr. Denis Beaumont.
President: Rev. Dr. Kenneth Greet
Monday 6th July at 8 p.m.
Cranmer Methodist Church, Wolverhampton.
MPF AGM at 4.30 p.m. (Same venue)
Tea at 6.15 approx..

There will be the usual stall somewhere in the Conference Hall (Civic Hall, Wolverhampton). As always Denis needs help though the year we have only been able to get a stall from Monday to the close of Conference. Please phone Denis if you can help 01902 895585.

I must reiterate the need for new and younger committee members. Please come to the AGM or contact us with suggestions.

Maurice

Donation may be sent to John Young, Shalfleet, Dunston Heath, Stafford, ST18 9AN

I enclose £..... as a contribution towards the costs of "Peace in the 21st Century". [Cheques payable to the Methodist Peace Fellowship, please. If you would like a receipt, please tick here.....]

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